



*as retold by Daryl Brower*

*with illustrations by Eloise Narrigan*

Long ago on one of the Shetland Isles (no one can say for sure which one), lived a little lame girl called Mairgrete who lived with her mother in a little house that sat on the shore of the voe. (A voe, in case you are wondering, is something like an inlet.) Now, Mairgrete's house was not like the houses you and I live in. The walls were rough stone, and it had a sod roof topped with odd little boulders wrapped in seaweed to keep the sod bits from blowing away in the wild Shetland winds. Daisies, sea pinks, and ragged robin grew from the roof, and the yard was made of fine white sand and little pink and white shells.

Mairgrete and her mother lived alone in the house (though in the colder months it was not unusual to find a lamb or even a pig or two by the peat fire). They had little to call their own, save a few bits of furniture and a spinning wheel. The house had but one room and one window, and the sea spray often beat against the pane. Inside it was dark and dreary because, as I said before, there was but one window, and no matter how much Mairgrete's mother scrubbed, the smoke from the fire blackened the walls.



*Mairgrete would sit by the window in her little chair and spin and knit.*

Mairgrete's dear papa was lost to the sea long ago, and every morning since, her mother would leave the little house to find work as she could. She would leave at dawn with a promise to be back soon, and every evening she would return from a weary day's work to sup on bread and broth with Mairgrete. In the time in between, Mairgrete would sit in her little chair by the window and spin or knit, turning the fine wool from the island's many sheep into sturdy socks and sweaters. From that window Mairgrete could see the great sea and the other islands; and more often than not, the other children playing and laughing in the surf. Mairgrete, with her little lame leg, couldn't run and play with them. But though her leg pained her terribly and her hands hurt from spinning and knitting, she never spoke a word of complaint.

One day the sea roared so wildly that it struck again and again against the tiny window, making it impossible to see out. With little else to look at, Mairgrete began watching a spider as it spun a web in the window. She marveled at how clever he was and how quickly he worked. He crawled from one corner to the other, spinning a line behind him, then back to the middle, and out to another corner until he had formed a sort of wheel with spokes all joining in the center. And when that was done, he began to work in circles. Round and round he went, so fast that Mairgrete began to feel quite dizzy and queer. As she watched, the spider seemed to grow larger and larger, and the web covered more and more of the window. And when she looked back again at the spider, he wasn't a spider at all, but an odd little man with a ruddy, wrinkled face. (The spider, you see, was actually

a *trow*, a magical creature quite common in the Orkneys and the Norse lands. They're not usually out and about in daylight hours, but remember, it was very dark in Mairgrete's house.) The *trow* looked at Mairgrete and said these words: "Watch me, Mairgrete, and I shall teach you to spin and knit more beautifully than ever you thought possible."



*"Watch me, Mairgrete, and I shall teach you to spin and knit more beautifully than ever you thought possible."*

So Mairgrete watched and saw that it was not spider's silk that the *trow* was spinning, but a fine, soft wool, and that the web was not a web at all, but a beautiful pattern of lace stitches, each more delicate and beautiful than the next. And as the *trow* worked the rounds she saw how it was done and marveled at how easy it all seemed.

The cottage door opened suddenly and the spell was broken. When Mairgrete turned back to the window there was only an ordinary web and an old gray spider sitting on the ledge underneath. "Oh Mam," she cried. "You've frightened away the *trow* and just as I was learning such lovely knitting!"

"Poor wee Mairgrete," her mother replied. "Such nonsense you've been dreaming. Now be a good girl and let me rest a moment, it's been a weary day's work." So Mairgrete was quiet and pictured the pattern over and over again in her head so as not to forget it.



The next morning Mairgrete pulled out the whitest wool and set to work.

The next morning Mairgrete carefully plucked the whitest, softest wool from the sheep that strayed near her door (this is called *rooing* and is how the Shetland people gathered wool long ago) and set to work. The wool would not spin fine enough the first day, nor on the second, but she kept at it, hearing the voice of the trow above the whirr of the spinning wheel. “Almost Mairgrete, try again, try again.”

On the third day Mairgrete once more set to work, still hearing the voice of the trow. “Almost Mairgrete, try again, try again.” And this time when she looked at her work, she saw the finest, most even wool that had ever been spun—soft and strong all at once. She set to knitting with it, looking to the window and the spider’s web every now and again, for once more it seemed made of wool and the lovely patterns were clear as day. When her mother returned that evening, she found Mairgrete sitting at the window, with the most breathtakingly beautiful shawl she had ever seen wrapped about her shoulders. And her mother forgot her weary day’s work and marveled at it. “So fine, Mairgrete,” she said, fingering the wool. “I believe it would slip through a wedding ring.” And she pulled hers from her finger, and sure enough the shawl slipped right through.

Now in the Shetlands, nothing is secret for long and word of the wondrous shawl that was fine enough to slip through a ring spread from one island to the next, all the way to a great lady in

Lerwick, who decided that she must see this wondrous creation for herself and set sail that very afternoon.

And so it was that one morning, as she sat by the window, her hands busy as always, Mairgrete saw a white sail on the sea, making for the voe. In time there was a great commotion outside and a knock on the cottage door. Mairgrete went to open it, dragging her poor lame leg behind her. There on the threshold stood a beautiful lady dressed in the finest silks and satins. She asked to see the shawl, and when presented with it proclaimed it to be the loveliest thing she had ever seen. "I should like to take this with me," said the lady, and she gave Mairgrete a gold piece in payment. Mairgrete had never seen such riches and the sight left her speechless. "Now," said the lady. "Have you anymore? For once the ladies of Lerwick see this one, they will each want their own." And she smiled and left.

Now as I've said before, in the Shetlands, nothing is secret for long, and the villagers were soon knocking Mairgrete's door asking about the fine lady and the piece of gold and wondering aloud at what such riches could buy. And Mairgrete, clever girl that she was, saw what could be. "Come," she said. "We can all spin and knit for gold. I will show you how." And she taught them how to spin yarn that was soft and strong and how to knit fine, beautiful lace shawls without rules or patterns or counting of stitches in a way that no one outside the Isles can, for no trow ever came to teach them.

**Author's note:** *This story is just one of many Shetland tales passed down through the generations, all told in varying ways. This version derives from one posted on [www.diddilydeedot.zoomshare.com/42.html](http://www.diddilydeedot.zoomshare.com/42.html); a trove of information and stories for children from different parts of the world.*

## The Fact in the Fiction

Shetland knitters began making their famed lace shawls in the mid-1800s. The spinners of Unst, the northernmost isle, were known for a particularly fine yarn, and put it to good use knitting gloves and stockings for export. As described by Richard Rutt in *A History of Hand Knitting* (Interweave Press), a fine lady in Lerwick, Mrs. Charles Ogilvy, did indeed hear of the exquisite handwork being done in the Shetlands, but it was in the form of a lace christening cap for her infant son, gifted by a friend. A female relation copied the bonnet, and in doing so decided the pattern would make for a lovely shawl. In 1839, while traveling through the islands, one Edward Standen of Oxford saw the aforementioned lady knitting her shawl, and upon his return to Lerwick, encouraged his landlady to advise the young ladies she knew to try a similar design. These ladies in turn passed the designs on to the poor women whom they patronized, turning a pleasurable pastime into a literal cottage industry. Standen, who was involved in the hosiery trade, began introducing the shawls to the

London market, where they became quite fashionable. Lesser quality imitations ensued, and by the 1920s, the shawls had all but disappeared, replaced by Fair Isle.

Whether taught by a trow or a lady of leisure, the knitters of Unst and the other Isles have an uncanny ability to work without written instructions and an innate talent for combining patterns into breathtaking designs. Their knit pieces are constructed without visible cast-on or cast-off edges, and grafted rather than seamed to keep the piece as fluid as possible. Today just a few skilled women preserve the tradition, knitting and spinning gossamer shawls that tell a rich textile story.